



Life returns

Located in the heart of the Congo, World Heritage-listed Garamba National Park is one of the oldest national parks in Africa. However, decades of abuse at the hands of rebel armies and commercial poaching gangs have decimated its once prolific herds. But an improvement in the local security situation has seen the park's wildlife bounce back. **Stephen Cunliffe** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS by STEPHEN CUNLIFFE



Ratatat-tat-tat. The noise came as if in a dream. There were strange popping sounds all around us and I couldn't work out what was going on. The wind-screen exploded. I could see blood everywhere. Suddenly, I realised: we had driven into an LRA ambush.'

It was 10 February 2009, and Paul Fredrick Ogutu Onyango was with a mixed group of rangers and soldiers investigating a report that guerrillas from the notorious Lord's Resistance Army were hiding close to the southern boundary of Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). 'The vehicle picked me up last, so I was sitting on the back, and that saved my life,' Onyango says.

Once he realised what was happening, Onyango dived off the back of the Land Cruiser, rolled across the road and used his FN Browning rifle to lay down covering fire while his fellow rangers and soldiers escaped from the bullet-riddled vehicle. A quietly spoken but engaging Kenyan, Onyango had been employed to train and lead a force of Congolese Wildlife Authority (ICCN)

rangers as they endeavoured to re-establish control of the park. His 22 years of experience with the Kenyan Wildlife Service included extensive paramilitary training and a six-year stint with an anti-banditry unit operating on the Somali border, and as the battle raged, he remained calm.

During a pause in the shooting, Onyango crept back to the vehicle to check for survivors. 'In the front of the vehicle, I found the driver with the warden next to him and both were dead, but the army captain was still alive,' he says. 'There were also four women and children [who had hitched a lift] hiding under the vehicle and their crying and screaming was really bad for our morale. I moved them, along with the wounded captain, behind a large termite mound. The captain had been shot in the head but, miraculously, he was still alive. Over and over, he kept telling me, "Paul take my Thuraya [satellite phone] and call for reinforcements." I tried, but it was so full of blood that I couldn't even get it to switch on.'

After 40 minutes of intense fighting,

